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SUBJECT: FADILAH LEADER SUGGESTS SADR REPLACEMENTS

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Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg D'Elia, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S/REL MCFI) Summary: In a wide-ranging June 29 conversation with Poloff and Wasit PRToffs, Fadilah spiritual leader Abbas al-Zaydi explained that Iran supported both ISCI and JAM, but for different functions; "JAM is tactical; ISCI is strategic." He complained that the GOI was "acting as a dictatorship" but said the government offensives were further splitting the Sadrism movement. Abbas said the emergence of a new, nationalist Sadrism leader would be "the solution to many of Iraq's problems" and offered Hussein al-Sadr and Ismail al-Waili (brother of Basrah governor Mohammed al-Waili) as possible candidates. Abbas said Iraqis were turning against religious parties, including Fadilah, and predicted such parties would fare poorly in the upcoming provincial elections. He presented U.S. officials with several copies of a book he wrote about the relationship between Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr and Ismail al-Waili. Abbas claimed that ISCI had reacted poorly to the book and alleged that ISCI leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim was complicit in the interrogation and torture of Ismail in the late 1990s. End Summary.

GOI becoming a dictatorship

¶2. (S/REL MCFI) Fadilah spiritual leader and Wasit university professor Abbas al-Zaydi met with U.S. officials at Forward Operating Base Delta. Abbas said that the current GOI operations in Maysan were "necessary," but complained that "it is not fair; Maliki kills JAM in Maysan, but then travels to Iran and meets with the Iranians and doesn't wear a tie." (Note: Since the revolution, neck ties have been viewed by the Iranian leadership as a Western, un-Islamic symbol. End Note.) Abbas characterized operations in Karbala, Wasit, and Diwaniyah as understandable reactions to unrest but said that the GOI campaigns in other provinces, including Baghdad and Basrah, were politically motivated. Warming to the theme, Abbas said the GOI was "acting as a dictatorship. During the Sadr City operation, the Prime Minister said anyone in parliament who refers to the 'siege of Sadr City' will have to face the law."

Sadrists need new leader

¶3. (S/REL MCFI) Despite his suspicion of the Maliki government, Abbas credited the GOI offensives with further splitting the Sadrism movement. Abbas said that he spoke several days ago with a representative from Fadilah's office in Qom. According to the representative, Iran is offering shelter and supplies to the JAM and Special Group members who have fled Iraq. Abbas said that Iran supported both ISCI and JAM, but that "JAM is tactical; ISCI is strategic." He explained that although ISCI was a long-term Iranian ally, Tehran (which he characterized as a 'cartoon government') used JAM as a "tool" to pressure the U.S. and distract

attention away from the Iranian nuclear program. However, Abbas maintained that the majority of Sadrists despise Iran and believe Tehran was complicit in the assassination of Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr. He added that many Sadrists are unhappy with Muqtada's decision to remain in Iran. Without prompting, Abbas volunteered that he has "no problem" with a Strategic Framework Agreement/Status of Forces Agreement between the GOI and USG and added that we just "don't want to be under the Iranian hammer."

¶4. (S/REL MCFI) "The solution to many of Iraq's problems is to unify the Sadrist Trend under a nationalist leader," Abbas said. He conceded that, as of now, no such leader had yet emerged. "He must be a nationalist and a Sadr," Abbas said, explaining that past contenders such as Adnan Shahmani had been unable to attract a significant following because they were not relatives of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr (Note: Adnan Shahmani's Iraqi National Gathering broke away from the Sadr Trend but has failed to attract significant grassroots support. End Note.) According to Abbas, Ayatollah al-Yaqoubi supports Hussein al-Sadr as a possible replacement for Muqtada al-Sadr. Abbas urged the U.S. to meet secretly with Hussein in Baghdad and assess his leadership potential. If a new, nationalist Sadrist leader emerges, Abbas speculated that Fadilah could eventually reunite with the Sadrists. "The Director of National Security asked me this very question last week, but I didn't want to discuss such sensitive things in front of a Da'wa partisan," Abbas added.

Public turning against religious parties

¶5. (S/REL MCFI) According to Abbas, "The religious parties are the biggest thieves of all," and due to this corruption "Iraqis are turning against all the religious parties." He

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said he delivered a Friday sermon in Diwaniyah that denied any contradiction between secular and Islamic ideals and advocated a separation between church and state. He also expressed nostalgia for a time when Iraqis of all faiths lived together peacefully. "I am a religious man, but I believe that a religious dictatorship is the worst form of dictatorship," Abbas declared. He predicted the religious parties would fare poorly in the provincial elections due to public resentment and diminished authority of the marja'iyya, concluding that "Badr is weak without Sistani's cloak." Abbas conceded that Fadilah could also suffer from this backlash, and speculated that Fadilah would disband itself if a "fair and good government" came to power.

Controversial book links ISCI and Iran

¶6. (S/REL MCFI) Abbas brought several copies of a book he recently wrote entitled "Al-Sadr's Envoy: A Resume and Biography of Shaykh Isma'il Musabbih al-Wai'li's and His Relationship with Martyr al-Sadr." The book, written in Arabic and English, emphasizes the close relationship between Isma'il (brother of Basrah governor Muhammed al-Wai'li) and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. According to Abbas, the book provoked a "strong reaction" from ISCI and was published in Kuwait "because I could not publish such a book under a Da'wa government." Asked to elaborate, Abbas said that in the late 1990s Isma'il had worked in Iran as an envoy of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. Khomeini sent a message to Sadr through Isma'il asking him to stop agitating against the Saddam regime, he claimed. When Sadr refused, the Iranian government arrested and tortured Isma'il, "and his chief interrogator was Abdel Aziz al-Hakim."

¶7. (S/REL MCFI) Comment: Abbas was remarkably frank and direct during the meeting, both about dynamics within the Fadilah party and the public resentment directed towards religious parties. Although the emergence of a new, nationalist Sadrist leader would be a welcome development,

past experience suggests that Hussein al-Sadr does not likely command the public support necessary to fulfill this role - in fact, on June 29 Abbas called the PRT and proposed that Isma'il would be a better candidate and suggested that the U.S. arrange a meeting with Isma'il outside of Iraq.

18. (S/REL MCFI) Comment (con't): There is reason to question the sincerity of some of Abbas' comments. Although Abbas attacked the corruption of religious parties, Gov. Waeli and the Fadilah party have faced numerous accusations of corruption during their tenure in Basrah. Similarly, while Abbas criticized the role of religion in politics and advocated a multi-faith society, at an earlier meeting with the PRT he presented a book entitled "Festivals of Christmas," written by Ayatollah al-Yaqoubi and translated into English. An opening line of the book reads "Our Christian brethren(celebrate the Christ's birth and the New Year's days with vociferous jollifications and exuberant mirth that include many acts of disobedience to Almighty Allah as well as grand sins and frantic acts that cannot be justified by the sensible people." Despite these seeming contradictions, it is notable that Abbas is using his religious authority to publicly advocate for secular government. One explanation may be that Fadilah, recognizing that it cannot compete head-on with rival religious parties such as ISCI and Da'wa, is hoping to capitalize on public disenchantment by rebranding itself along more secular lines.

End Comment.

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